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THOSE LONG THEMES

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I cannot read them now.—

O gentlemen, the time of life is short.

—I Henry IV, Act V, scene ii.

Teachers of English composition will agree with the writer in the *New International Dictionary* that the conference room is a “room for conference and prayer,” the prayer being that the labor spent upon our unwilling authors be not as vain as it often seems. Happy are those colleges where regulation themework may be dispensed with without loss to the students! At present these are not many. Where themes must be written and read, the question remains as to how to get the greatest effect with the least effort.

I am not here concerned with the treatment of the original theme: whether it shall be read and discussed with the student individually, or whether it shall be treated in the “group conference.” I am concerned not with the original but with the revision.

It is obvious that unless the suggestions for revision are followed out by the student the conference has little value other than as a social engagement. The words of wisdom deposited so solicitously in the young mind volatilize almost immediately, and at best turn into a sort of opaque vapor which serves only, as Robert Burton would have said, to “obnubilate” the mind. It is necessary that the student be held responsible for careful revision.

It is suspected by some that students will not make this careful revision unless they are compelled to. For that reason, suspicious teachers carefully scrutinize manuscript returned after conference. Others of a less cynical turn merely check off returned work, conveying the impression as best they may that they have read it. There is a great deal of excuse for these fat-cheeked optimists in the overpowering number of themes that have to be read for the

first time, not to mention a second. But any scrutiny of returned manuscript will reveal the innate depravity of students who suspect that their returned work is not examined.

Until a year or so ago I followed the old method of "keeping tab" on the revised work. I had the rewritten theme handed back folded together with the original. In cases of mere correction, sentences or paragraphs were written in revised form on the backs of the original sheets. This revised work came back distinguished from new matter only by the word "Revised" scrawled upon the outer sheet. I consider this method as primitive as the old wooden plow. I trust it is no longer used; for it compelled me to spend my days, or rather nights, in sorting themes, until I might well have exchanged places with a clerk in the railway post-office. When each student's work was assembled by itself, and the new separated from the old, it was still something of a feat to pair off the right originals with the right revisions, for there were always a number of short themes with the long ones. And all the sheets were loose, folded lengthwise, and ready to curl up unless held in place! Furthermore, the corrections on the back necessitated the continual turning of such sheets as were not rewritten. And always there was the devil behind one's shoulder, whispering, "Who will know if you don't look this over?"

Since then I have been using a system that is so simple that I dare say the same or a better is being used by many who do not think it worth discussion. But since the scheme works well, and none of the men working with me would go back to the old way, or change to the envelope system used in some places, which necessitates removal from the envelope and reinsertion every time the theme is examined, I shall venture to describe it.

There were certain definite effects I wished to achieve. First, of course, I wanted to reduce the amount of mechanical labor. Secondly, I conceived the possibility of securing a more cumulative effect for all the criticism offered the student during the half-year. Both these results and several others are accomplished by the simple device of having the student sort and arrange his own themes in a loose-leaf stiff-paper notebook cover. The student procures two heavy-paper notebook covers, and the little brass

fasteners for holding the papers in place, for five cents. With this outlay the student is equipped. In one folder he may file notes taken in class, for all paper used in the course is punched and fitted to these covers. In the other he files all his themes as he receives them back at time of conference. When he rewrites, he interleaves the copy with the original, placing the first sheet of the original on top, so that by a simple process of turning the leaves in the book, the instructor sees first the original sheet with the marks indicating corrections, and then the sheet in which these suggestions are put into effect. For sheets that are merely to be corrected, the process is still simpler, for the corrections, instead of being on the back of the original sheet, are written out on the back of the preceding page directly opposite when the notebook is open. Thus the reader has both the original and the corrected passage before him at once, without turning. The use of this notebook cover has reduced the work to a rapid leafing-over of a notebook. Where correction is not satisfactory, the leaf is turned down so that the corner indicates the passage requiring further attention. It is astonishing how many books have to be handed back for further correction the first time the method is used, and how few after the students are really convinced that their rewritten work is examined.

The student files his themes, makes his corrections, and hands the book back one week from the time of conference. This requirement insures revision within a reasonably short period after conference. The instructor examines the book promptly and returns it to the student, marked "O.K." and dated, or marked for further correction. The latter entails loss of credit. The student now keeps the book until he receives a new batch of themes at the next conference. After filing these on top of the last group, he submits his book for examination as before. At the end of the half-year the complete file containing all the written work of the student, both original and revised, is required of every student. This is retained by the department, inasmuch as when left in the hands of the student, the themes have a habit of reappearing year after year. In spite of the perfection which might be looked for from this repeated correction, the objection to the proceeding is obvious.

Leaving themes thus in the hands of the student for the half-year reduces the mechanical and meaningless labor of the instructor by allowing the student to do his own filing, and by substituting system for chaos. It furthermore gives the student a comprehensive view of his own work. He can look over his early work and see whether he is making the same blunders in his later work. He can see for himself whether he is making progress or not, and speedily isolate recurring sins.

There are other advantages, but only one needs to be noticed. This system exorcises the devil at the elbow. If the instructor "polices" the student's work, the student by this system "polices" the instructor. He will speedily discover it if his instructor accepts unknowingly careless revisions, and the instructor knows that he will. There is no longer need to pray the gods with Audrey to make us honest. And after all, as the copy-books used to teach, "Honesty is the best policy," and, in the present instance, not much trouble.